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FOR INFORMATION

STATEMENT OF THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE ON UNICEF TO THE UNICEF EXECUTIVE BOARD AT ITS ANNUAL SESSION, 2-6 JUNE 1997

The implementation of UNICEF policies and strategies on children in need of special protection measures

1. Over the past 12 months, the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Committee on UNICEF promoted protective measures for children in a number of fields. In the interest of brevity, only two will be mentioned. They concern children in armed conflict and unregistered children.

Children in armed conflict

2. Several of the 127 member organizations of the NGO Committee contributed to the United Nations Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. Their experience makes it all too clear that abuse of children escalates in times of war. Several facts emerged from the study carried out by Ms. Graça Machel which will influence NGO planning and programmes. Among them are four which I will cite:

(a) Children without strong family ties are more defenseless against abduction and recruitment into armies or militias;

(b) Children who have been harassed or witnessed harassment and ill-treatment of their families often join armed groups out of a sense of justice and vengeance;

(c) Girls are especially vulnerable in armed conflict situations, not least because they are more likely than boys to fall prey to sexual abuse and violence;

(d) A high proportion of children who have lived through situations of armed conflict suffer from various degrees of post-traumatic stress disorders. They are being helped by NGOs through a variety of programmes involving rehabilitation and reintegration, training and tracing of, and reuniting with, families if the children so desire.

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* E/ICEF/1997/13 and Corr.1.

3. As a collective of NGOs, the NGO Committee's action in this field has been multi-pronged. Since 1994, it has stressed peace education and the involvement of youth in that process. More recently, the Committee entered into a dialogue with representatives of the military to enlist their support in the fight against child abuse in armed and peace-keeping forces. Furthermore, considerable work has gone into negotiations on the optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on involvement of children in armed conflicts, which aims to raise the minimum age for recruitment from 15 to 18 years.

Unregistered children

4. Unregistered children are more vulnerable than registered and fully-documented children to a panoply of abuses including under-age recruitment into armed forces or opposition groups, trafficking, sale, prostitution, forced early marriages and intolerable forms of child labour, among others. They are in need of special protection measures even in less dramatic circumstances since they are often denied access to health services and education. In some countries, they are not accepted in schools or are denied primary school certificates which would allow them to go on to secondary and higher education. As non-citizens, they have no rights and in later life are often unable to rent or purchase an abode, to secure legal employment, to marry, to vote or be elected, to inherit or to benefit from social security.

5. The NGO Committee has started work on this issue in Southeast Asia in collaboration with regional partners and UNICEF. It intends to take this issue further in collaboration with Governments, UNICEF, NGOs and other segments of civil society. It is an urgent problem which the Committee commends to the Executive Board for consideration, bearing in mind that it constitutes a denial of children's rights under article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes the right to birth registration and identity for all children.

6. Infringements of children's rights are often linked to poverty, and non-registration of children is no exception. In this respect, I would like to call the attention of the Executive Board to a recent publication of the NGO Committee on UNICEF, "Women and Children in Urban Poverty - What Way Out", copies of which are available in the conference room.

7. The NGO Committee and its members stand ready to contribute to the quest of Governments and UNICEF to protect vulnerable children and to prevent children's and families' vulnerability wherever possible. We remain convinced that close collaboration of Governments and intergovernmental organizations with civil society is a key factor for progress in that endeavour, and that without it, sustainability of progress will be difficult to ensure.

8. Finally, the NGO Committee on UNICEF wishes to express its strong support for the excellent report on steps for policy implementation in the area of special protection measures for children (E/ICEF/1997/16) and reiterate its commitment to strengthen cooperation in this area. A new structure is being set-up for follow-up to the 1996 World Conference on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, which is a problem aggravated, among others, by armed conflicts and the failure to register all children at birth. The collaboration between UNICEF and NGOs must and will continue to make children safer, happier and better prepared for the future.